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## Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited. By Pippa Norris

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## Review

*Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited.* By Pippa Norris. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 335p. (paperback) ISBN 0521127440. US List \$34.99.

There is a prevailing anxiety about democracies suffering from a crisis in their legitimacy. Several studies confirm this fear by focusing on popular discontent, voter anger and deep mistrust of their government. Pippa Norris challenges the idea that "political disaffection has worsened in recent decades, with significant consequences for democratic governance" (4). The answer to the claim of political disaffection is clear: "public support for the political system has not eroded consistently in established democracies, not across a wide range of countries around the world" (241), but nevertheless, "satisfaction with the performance of democracy continues to diverge from public aspirations" (242). She labels this gap as the 'democratic deficit' in her new book, *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (2011) and develops some of the arguments raised more than a decade ago in a previous edited book, *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance* (1999). Norris attempts to create a framework that integrates different approaches in order to understand this democratic deficit and places citizens, media and government as central actors in her explanation. Norris compared three types of explanations (cultural accounts; the role of news media; and the rational and instrumental response of public opinion to the institutional context) and came to the conclusion that some factors help predict higher democratic aspirations. These factors include: education, self-expression, trust and activism, but only education seems to widen the democratic deficit. Media (newspapers, radio, television and Internet) seem to strengthen democratic values and aspirations and the regular use of media seem to reduce the democratic deficit. Exploration into the exposure of negative news was limited and further research is needed in order to confirm or disconfirm its impact on public opinion. Finally, when analyzing public satisfaction with the state's performance, the data supported the thesis that "the way people experience democratic governance leads them to express negative or positive assessments of the way the regime works in their own country" (215).

The book is divided into four major sections. The first one sets the theoretical and methodological framework. Norris explains, "the deficit arises, in essence because many citizens today believe that it is important to live in a democratic state, yet they remain dissatisfied when evaluating how democracy works" (19). The second section examines the symptoms of the deficit. Norris points out that we have to be careful not to treat 'political support' as a whole and distinguishes trends in public attitudes. The author came to the conclusions that older liberal democracies have stronger democratic cultures; autocracies show stronger feelings of nationalism and support for the public sector; and democratic aspirations are found everywhere no matter what kind of regime is in place. Norris tells us that there is no significant erosion of system support, but some fluctuations over time are apparent; older liberal democracies believe in the importance of democracy and have relatively positive perceptions of how it works; younger democracies are more diverse in their perceptions; and post-

communist states display a large gap between expectations and perceived performances. The third section diagnoses the causes of the democratic deficit. Norris came to the conclusion that culture only provides a partial explanation of democratic orientations. One of the main findings was that "many people subscribe to a procedural understanding of the meaning of democracy; therefore, democracy is most commonly associated with certain basic procedures, practices, and institutions, such as leadership elections, women's rights, and civil liberties" (166). The last section attempts to estimate the likely outcome of this democratic deficit and summarizes the main arguments. Norris explains that democratic aspirations play an important role in strengthening different forms of political participation, reinforce the respect of law and contribute to sustainable democratic regimes.

Norris was able to demonstrate the main arguments listed in the introduction in a concise and clear style. This was done with an interesting selection of data from several well-known international surveys and a compelling description of the theories and propositions to be validated by her multilevel analysis. Norris presented the different theoretical arguments commonly used to explain the democratic deficit and then she applied the data and a methodological framework designed to test these arguments. Although the arguments are clear and logically presented throughout the book and the statements and facts seem to be accurate, there are underlying details that challenge her main arguments. One critique of the book is the fact that foreign interventions in countries around the world are not taken into consideration in the analysis of democratic values and praise of democracy (for example see 48-50 or 147). Democracy is always considered an internal (domestic) development and what a country does outside its borders is not considered in the surveys. We do not know if foreign policy could influence the idea people have of a democratic government and ultimately how it could affect Norris' arguments. Another critique worth mentioning is the lack of nuances of some indicators. For example, Canadians scored 85.5 % in their feeling of nationalism (98). One wonders how that is possible knowing Québec's historical rejection of Canada based on its struggle for autonomy. Another example is the assumption that China has raised millions from poverty (115); however, we are aware of China's dubious labor practices and how millions are displaced from the countryside and forced to become part of the working poor.<sup>1</sup> We can also have doubts about the meaning of some terms. For example, it is not clear what Norris means by a "globalised society"; does she mean an ethnically and culturally diverse society or a more technologically interconnected one? Finally, one can find the section about the impact of the news too simplistic in its explanation of some phenomena. It assumes that media has an impact and left out theories about how news is received or how peer discussions can orient our understanding of it. Some assumptions can also be challenged, for example, how can we ensure that people are not influenced by the mainstream news media in countries with independent media just because they have 'access' to both of them (114-115)?

Besides these details, the overall arguments of this book, mentioned in the first paragraph, raise some concerns and implications. The main objective is to evaluate the disparities between democratic aspirations and democratic satisfactions with data coming from surveys in order to speak of a democratic deficit. Norris acknowledges how difficult it is to an-

alyze human aspirations and satisfactions, but she is still able to proceed by using a multi-level analysis. From a more philosophical point of view, it is misleading to think that we can do justice to human complexity with a method because we risk being reductive and limiting our own self-understanding. Moreover, Norris' main conclusion (public support for the political system has not eroded) tends to discredit critics of the Western political system who suggest that democracy is not working well or not helping achieve the well-being of all humans. Thus, even though Norris attempts to explain the causes of the 'deficit,' the main argument tends to legitimize the systems in place without questioning the economic system that produces the inequalities and the crises people have faced at different periods of history. Democracy is taken for granted as the only best possible political system. However, its failures explain the grassroots movements that have obtained more media attention since the events in Seattle in 1999 and more recently with the 'Occupy Movement' in 2011. Within these movements, people have clearly expressed their incredulity in the political system of Western countries. Furthermore, Norris' conclusions do not take into account how people identify with their political system and country; in other words, how a person self identifies with what seems to be a 'good system,' in this case 'democracy' or a 'nationality.' The questions asked deal with trust and confidence in the following institutions: Congress, Federal government, Executive, Supreme Court, Banks, Major companies, Government, Parliaments, Political parties, Democracy. It also asked how proud people were of their countries. Finally, the idea of a just society is not explored consistently and the disparities between nationals and immigrants is not considered. How can we speak of a democratic deficit if the definition of democracy is so unclear for many scholars? Why concentrate on the idea of democracy (procedures, institutions and authority) and not another one like public social goods and services?

Norris' new book will draw the attention of an audience already interested in public perceptions, governance and methodology, but also from people in the field of Cultural Studies. Unfortunately, there is little in this book for people interested in critical media analysis or political economy of communication. Despite the concerns I have raised here, I think this is a good book filled with quality research and analysis that contributes significantly to a more comprehensive methodological framework of research.

#### Notes

1. See for example Jens Lerche. "Labour Conditions and the Working Poor in China and India," SOAS, <http://www.soas.ac.uk/development/research/labour/labour-conditions-and-the-working-poor-in-china-and-india/>, or the book: Ingrid Nielsen and Russell, eds., *Migration and Social Protection in China* (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2008).

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